

Notes from the President

In Appreciation of Our Fallen Veterans — Memorial Day 2015

05/20/2015

Like virtually every corner of our national life, Georgia Tech has been touched by loss from military conflict. Funded by the World War II classes of 1944-46, the Memorial Mall at the entrance of our Wardlaw Building is a sobering reminder of the human cost of war. This Memorial Day weekend, our fellow citizens will pause to remember and honor the more than 1.3 million American men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice as U.S. Armed Forces members.

At our Spring Commencement earlier this month, we heard from one of America's foremost military leaders, Gen. Philip Breedlove, a Georgia Tech graduate who is the 17th Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO Allied Command Operations. The first to hold that position was Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, one of Gen. Breedlove's heroes. Gen. Eisenhower was the military genius who led Operation Overlord, which liberated Western Europe in World War II.

"In the best of circumstances, he faced being responsible for thousands of casualties," Gen. Breedlove said of Eisenhower. "In the worst of circumstances, his failure would mean generations of democratic societies may have faced very different circumstances."

The eventual victory came at a terrible cost. More than 9,000 Allied soldiers were killed or wounded on one day — June 6, 1944 — as they came ashore along a 50-mile stretch of heavily fortified French coastline. Many were about the same age as the students who attend Georgia Tech today. Had they not succeeded, the world of the 21st century would look very different. Seventy years ago this month, Germany signed an act of military surrender, and the world celebrated V-E Day — Victory in Europe — on May 8, 1945.

Painfully aware of the loss of life in troops under his command, Gen. Eisenhower made a point to visit and express his gratitude to every division involved in the invasion. About a month after the German surrender, he gave a moving speech in war-torn London that has become known as the [Guildhall Address \(PDF\)](#). I commend it to your reading or [listening](#). In the accompanying ceremony, the grateful Brits named him an honorary Londoner, a distinction he found bittersweet. Early in his memorable remarks, he said the following:

"Humility must always be the portion of any man who receives acclaim earned in blood of his followers and sacrifices of his friends. Conceivably a commander may have been professionally superior. He may have given everything of his heart and mind to meet the spiritual and physical needs of his comrades. He may have written a chapter that will glow forever in the pages of military history. Still, even such a man, if he existed, would sadly face the fact that his honors cannot hide in his memories the crosses marking the resting places of the dead. They cannot soothe the anguish of the widow or the orphan whose husband or whose father will not return."

As Americans, we recognize that our liberty has been hard-won by the sacrifices made by our veterans. This Memorial Day, many of us will celebrate — as we should — by enjoying the day with friends, family and food. My wish is that, like Eisenhower, we will also spare a moment for sincere humility and reflection to recognize that we, too, owe a debt that we can never repay.

Please be safe, and accept our heartfelt wishes from Georgia Tech for a meaningful Memorial Day.

G. P. "Bud" Peterson
President, Georgia Tech